

Interviewee: Ray Winter

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 27 July 2004

Location: telephone to the Winter residence, Maple Lake, MN

Transcribed by: Kimberly Johnson, August 2004

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, August 2004

Ray Winter was born 15 March 1918 in Watkins, Minnesota, one of six children. He attended country school, and then Maple Lake High School. In 1941 Ray was drafted into the US Army, and by 1944 he was serving in eastern Belgium with the 106th Infantry Division, as a scout.

The Germans launched a large scale attack on this area on 16 December 1944. Three days later, on 19 December, Ray was among the thousands of US troops captured by the advancing Germans.

As a POW, Ray spent a short time at Camp IV-B, Muhlberg, then was sent on a work detail to the city of Leipzig, where he remained until liberated. Conditions were poor.

Following liberation in April 1945, Ray was flown to England by American forces, then transported by ship back to the United States. He was discharged later in 1945 with the rank of corporal.

Again a civilian, Ray returned to Maple Lake, got married in 1946 (wife Catherine), and worked as an ice cream driver until his retirement in 1980.

Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

R = Ray Winter

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 27 July 2004, and this is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I'm interviewing Mr. Ray Winter of Maple Lake, Minnesota. First, on the record, Ray, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me this afternoon.

R: It's all right.

T: For the record, you were born 15 March 1918 in Watkins, Minnesota, one of six children. You attended country school. In 1941 you were drafted into the US Army, and by 1944 you were serving with the 106th Infantry Division, as a scout. In late 1944 that unit was dispatched to Europe, and in the beginning of December 1944 took up positions on the Belgian – German border. This is where I want to pick up the story, Ray, because with the German attack that month the 106th Infantry Division was suddenly in the middle of the war.

R: Right.

T: You were captured on 19 December 1944, and I want to go back to that time and ask you if could describe the time you were captured. What exactly happened to you?

R: Well, I was a scout at the time, and I had to go from our company to the next company. I got there that morning, and the first think was, they thought I was a German (*laughs*). Because they were already surrounded, too, see, this other company, and they said, "Boy, you're lucky. You better get right back to your company because you guys are all surrounded." So I got back there, and they had my tent and everything all packed and ready for me to move out. Then from there we were all together. I figure there was eleven hundred [1,100] of us, I think, that were all captured.

T: What time of day were you captured?

R: This must have been five o'clock in the morning.

T: So it was dark out.

R: Yes. We just started walking back, and we run into the Germans. And the first thing we all did was, we was walking along a river, and we threw all our guns and everything into the river, so the Germans wouldn't get them.

T: So at that point it was clear to you and others that you were going to become POWs?

R: Yes.

T: When did it occur to you, Ray, that, oh my gosh, I'm going to be captured.

R: Actually, when I got back to my company we were told that we were all surrounded, that we could possibly be captured.

T: How much thought had you ever given, Ray, before that time to what it would be like to be a POW?

R: Not at all.

T: So when it happened, I hear you saying it was something you had to sort out right then and there, in your head.

R: That's right, yes.

T: When you actually saw the Germans for the first time, describe what that was like to be face-to-face with the enemy.

R: Well, there wasn't much more that we could do, you know. First thing they did, they had us march along, and I don't know how many they had, I can't count them, but it was all piled up with American corpses, laying there on a pile. They wanted us to see that right away, you know. That's the first thing. There were these Americans, all piled up there. They were all frozen and everything already. Then they had us march and get to a place, they interviewed us all.

(A, 52)

T: So you were questioned on that day you were captured.

R: Oh yes.

T: The person speaking to you spoke English to you?

R: Yes.

T: What did they want to know from you, a corporal in an infantry division?

R: Actually we were supposed to say only our name, rank, and serial number. But they wanted to know our company, how many people were in our company, and even where we were from. But we just didn't tell them much.

T: Were you threatened at all when you didn't answer their questions?

R: Well, not really, but they were superior, and over us.

T: Were you afraid in that situation?

R: Well, I imagine I was, yes. Most of them were afraid, because we didn't know what was going to happen. Fear of the unknown.

T: Were you personally threatened, or struck by the Germans when you were captured?

R: No, not really. But it was clear we had to do what they said.

T: Next let's talk about the march to Muhlberg. How much was marching, and how much on trains?

R: We walked for about thirty days straight. We walked the entire way. Now I can't remember exactly, but on Christmas Day, that's 25 December, they had us in a train depot. Well, the Americans really liked those railroad tracks and stations, see, and they just bombed us something awful on Christmas Day. We were at the train depot, but not in a train.

After that they put us in railroad cars, and we were in there for seven days. Sitting still. Didn't move for a week. We had half a loaf of this sourdough bread they gave us. We stayed in those railroad cars for seven days. For that whole week we weren't out of those railroad cars. Finally we got out of those boxcars, and started walking again.

T: First, what about the conditions in those railroad cars?

(A, 102)

R: It was kind of, well, there's a few of them that never made it. If you had to go to the bathroom, you had to do that in your helmet. So it was, it was kind of scary in there. You didn't know when you were going to get out of it. You just try to do the best you can, you just have to keep on going. Otherwise you've, you've lost it. Some guys were better at that than others. A lot of them were a lot worse.

T: Did the Germans bring food and water?

R: No. That's what we got, that half a loaf of sourdough bread. No water that I know of.

T: Were you strafed or bombed at all in those boxcars?

R: No, not in those boxcars we didn't. The only time was when we were in the train depot. We were in the building, but it just blew them apart. We were one of the lucky ones. The building was damaged completely, you might say. There was a big tree right there, and that came right through the side of that building. But not too many men were injured or killed that I know of. I was fortunate.

While we were marching back to the train station, before all that happened, that day they made us stay in a German barracks. Right away we went and made a thing out in the middle of the grounds, I don't know how we did it, but it said "American." We figured we would be bombed, you know, and, well, they did—they really bombed us. They just lowered those buildings. And we were right in, in fact one of the bombs fell right outside the barracks where I was, and made a great big hole in the ground there. The building just shook like paper. So I had two really close calls.

T: Ray, what goes through your mind when you're being attacked like that?

(A, 145)

R: I think we did a lot of praying (*laughs*). Because we could hear the bombs whistling down, you know. We started praying, but said, maybe this is the one. Then after the train station, and getting out of the railroad cars, we just marched and marched some more after that.

While we were marching all those days, they tried to let us go where we wanted. What we would do, when we could, we would go way out into the fields someplace, because the Americans bombed many of them towns so bad. So out there we wouldn't get hit by the American bombs. Everybody slept right close together, each one of us, because it was in the winter, and we had to keep warm. At night a lot of times we'd stay in barns, and cattle and everything would be in there.

T: Were you still together with all the men you were captured with, or were the Germans breaking off smaller groups of men?

R: No, we were practically all together at first. And this march took us all the way to [Stalag IV-B] Muhlberg.

T: When did you arrive at IV-B?

R: I don't know exactly.

T: After New Year's?

R: Oh yes.

T: The march along the way, at night were you outside more, or inside more?

R: At the first part we were outside mostly.

T: How was food supplied during the march?

R: We never knew from one day to the next. We might get a cup of turnip soup, and that would be the whole meal. I remember having that more than once, in fact it seemed like every day.

T: How were holding up physically during the march?

R: I think I done pretty good through the march.

T: Marching, Ray, did you go through little towns and villages, cities maybe?

R: Yes. Mostly smaller towns.

T: Did you see German civilians?

R: We saw them, yes. A lot of them were waving at us and everything.

T: Civilians more friendly or hostile?

R: I think most of them looked like they were friendly.

T: Any interaction with them? Did they offer you bits of food, or something to drink?

R: No, that they didn't do. The only times we got food was when they took us to another Stalag or camp.

T: So on the march, you made stops at camps along the way?

R: Yes. Every once in a while they put us in camps while we were marching back [towards Muhlberg]. The one place, and these were British soldiers, and they must have been captured quite a while already, we could sneak over there and try to get something to eat from them. They were getting a little more than we were. They [the Germans] would really get after us, because we were supposed to stay in our own area.

T: On the whole, during the weeks of marching, what was the most difficult thing for you personally?

(A, 212)

R: Just seeing what was going to be our next meal, something to eat. Food was the main topic. Anything we could find along the road, we'd eat it.

T: Did you have opportunities to get things that were edible?

R: Yes, especially when we were at Leipzig [on the work detail], because we were there for quite a while. They'd take us from our place where we stayed to the railroad yards, and then we'd try to sneak off from our guards. And anything we could find, you know, we'd take it. Each one of us had a, a can or something, and we'd take it along back home. And we always had some water there, and we'd take this can and put all our stuff in there, put some water in there, and then cook it over this fire we had, we'd heat it up. That's what we'd eat, that was extra, you know.

T: So scrounging for food became part of your everyday existence.

R: Oh, right.

T: When you got to IV-B, how long did you actually stay there?

R: Actually not too long at all. *(pauses three seconds)* I'd say maybe two weeks at that one. And then we were marching again. To Leipzig.

T: When you were at IV-B, do you remember being checked in by the Red Cross?

R: No.

T: Did you get POW tags with a number, or get your picture taken by the Germans?

R: No, we didn't. Never got tags with a number on it.

T: Were you kept in barracks there at IV-B?

R: Barracks. And the camp was closed in, with big long fences around it.

T: Describe the barracks.

R: Smaller rooms. Just had a place to sleep on, sort of a, I don't know if you'd call it a bed, but a place to sleep. Bunks were against the wall, two or three high. Just one in each bunk, but three or so high.

T: Was there a regular roll call in the morning that you recall?

R: Oh yes, yes there was. Mostly in the morning. You'd have to go outside, stand in formation, they counted us too, but most times it was your name. You'd have to give them your name.

T: What about the German guards, for example while marching to IV-B?

R: They was pretty strict. You do what they say, or they take care of you. Sometimes along the way the guards changed. Closer to the camp the treatment got better. The first of them were, I think you call them SS guards.

T: Did you personally witness any abuse of prisoners while you were marching?

R: Well, most times if you did something, they took you out of there. You didn't get to see that.

T: So you didn't see any abuse yourself.

R: No.

T: But did guys die along the way of this march?

R: Oh, yes. A lot of them, if you fell out of the ranks, you didn't see them anymore.

T: When guys died along the way to IV-B, what from your view was getting these guys?

R: I imagine it was weakness. Lack of food.

T: Let me ask about the German guards at IV-B.

R: They seemed to be... I imagine they was mostly, that was their job there, and they seemed like they were always the same there [they didn't change].

T: In your opinion, was the treatment different in the camp than on the march?

(A, 325)

R: I would say yes.

T: While you were at IV-B, were you on any work details?

R: No, we didn't.

T: What did you do at IV-B during the day?

R: Not a whole lot. Trying to keep it as easy as we could.

T: What do you remember about the food at IV-B?

R: Nothing that I remember but turnip soup. I remember that on the march, too.

T: When you were at IV-B, were you together with men that you had known before you were taken a POW?

R: Yes. Actually I was with them practically all the time until I went to the hospital, when I was at Leipzig on the work detail.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

T: So the whole group basically stayed together.

R: Yes it was.

T: Was there another POW that was an especially good friend for you, maybe better than the others?

R: No, not really. We were pretty much all close together.

T: Well, how much advance warning did the Germans give that you were going to be leaving?

R: Yes, but not a whole lot, they just called us out and then we started walking again. We learned the same day we left that we were leaving.

T: Did you feel good about leaving IV-B, or would you have preferred to stay?

R: I don't know, I think I was thinking it would be good to get out of there. There were rumors.

T: From your recollection, how long was the march to Leipzig? It's only about fifty miles as the crow flies.

R: Maybe two weeks, something like that. I'm not sure.

T: When did you get to Leipzig?

R: I can't remember exactly. I don't know anymore.

T: Let me ask about the work detail itself. You were part of a group of how many POWs that got sent there?

R: I would say there must have been a thousand men going to Leipzig. All American that I remember. There was one British doctor that I know of, I don't know how he got there, but anyway he was part of the group being moved to Leipzig.

At Leipzig we were kept in a, like a big building. Like a warehouse. It was all in the same building. Each one of us had a bunk, single beds, but they were about three high. We all slept in a large room; I was one of the top bunks.

It was, it had to be kind of on the outside of Leipzig, because they bombed that city every night, and every night we had to go into the basement, because the sirens were going. We could hear the bombs going off and everything. We couldn't see anything, because we were down in the basement, but every night, every night.

T: But not close enough to damage where you were.

R: It seems like they just always stayed away from where we were at.

T: Talk about the work you did.

R: They made us shovel coal off the railroad cars. That's the only job I had as part of the work detail anyway. I was part of the group that did that. They'd get us up on top of the railroad car, they gave each one a shovel, a coal shovel, and then we had to shovel the coal off of there, off to the side of the car. It was kind of dirty work.

T: What about the guards? Were they there?

R: Yes, but [there were] not that many [guards] there, because whenever they looked away or wasn't there we wouldn't shovel a whole lot of coal then (*laughs*).

T: Do you remember working every day?

R: Well, [we went to work] maybe not every day, but it was quite a few times that we went. Actually we kind of liked to go on the details, you know, because when they marched us back we'd kind of sneak out of the ranks and see what we could find to eat.

T: And what could you find there on the outskirts of Leipzig?

R: They used a lot of horses and carts for transportation over there, and well, (*laughs*) you took anything you got. If you found an onion laying in the horse manure, you picked it up and ate it. Anything edible. We took it back home, and then if we had a potato, and they had a lot of potatoes, you know, so you found them all over. Then you'd take it back home, cook it up a little bit, and you'd have a bit extra to eat.

The Germans had us on different, well, groups, so on certain days some people would get two cups of soup instead of one.

T: Kind of a staggering of portions? I mean, it sounds like a system where you got an extra portion maybe every second or third day.

(B, 100)

R: Yes, right. On other days you'd only get one.

T: How often did you see Red Cross parcels as a POW?

R: The only Red Cross parcel was when I got to the German hospital. That's the first thing they did, is gave me a Red Cross parcel. On the march, and in Muhlberg, and on the work detail, not a single one.

T: Ray, was escape something you personally ever thought about?

R: No, it never was. We would always talk about it, but we'd say, "Where are we going to go?"

T: So some talk, but it sounds like you thought it wasn't practical.

R: Right. We didn't know where we would go, from one place to the other. I could speak a little German, but we still didn't know where we'd go.

T: Now before we started talking you said that you ended up in a German hospital.

R: Right.

T: What happened to you?

R: Well, I was getting so weak that this doctor, the British doctor, you'd go and see him. He checked me out, and he says, "We're going to try this out. We're going to send you over to that hospital," I don't know if I had to take a slip along or something, but anyway he says, "We're going to tell them that you have diphtheria."

T: You didn't really have diphtheria, though.

R: No [I didn't have diphtheria]. I was malnourished. I got to the hospital, I imagine it was (*pauses five seconds*) I suppose it was about two or three weeks before the Americans came there. And that was the beginning of May, the first part of May, something in there.

T: Maybe the second or third week of April that you ended up in hospital, then?

R: Yes, something like that.

(B, 155)

T: Talk about the hospital.

R: Well, it wasn't a military hospital, it was a civilian hospital. As soon as I got there, this intern or whatever he was gave me, he said here's a Red Cross parcel. All it was, was dehydrated food in there, you know, so I had to get some water, but it started me back to life again, you might say (*laughs*). I imagine I used to weigh about 180 pounds, like that, and when they liberated me I weighed 110 pounds. I lost about seventy pounds.

T: What kind of room were you in at the hospital?

R: I was supposed to have diphtheria, you see, so I was in my own room. It was like, it had a regular bed like in the hospital.

T: So from one day to the next from a work detail to a private room in a civilian hospital.

R: Right. It was a step up (*laughs*). Then I got the dehydrated food, and I started eating that, too, so I did start to feel better.

T: You were cared for by a German doctor, or medical professional of some kind, a man you mentioned before we started taping. Talk about him.

R: I saw him every day, you might say. He was very friendly to me. Every day he would tell me just how close the Americans were coming to Leipzig.

T: Updates on the war.

R: Yes. He was really nice to me. We didn't talk about anything else really, the only thing he said was, "Here's a billfold and my watch. You might as well have that, because they're going to take it away from me when they come, the Americans." There was nothing in the billfold, though. And I still have his billfold. I gave him the watch back, because he was so nice (*with emotion*).

T: Sounds like he knew the end was very near.

(B, 200)

R: Yes.

T: What did you do there in the hospital those weeks?

R: It was just like in a regular hospital. Not a whole lot of visits, this intern was there just about every day, and he took care of me.

T: Sounds like you had, at least there, good fortune.

R: Yes. I was getting back to, not back to normal, but before that I was getting pretty weak.

T: You started to feel physically better while you were in the hospital?

R: Oh yes. They really helped me along.

T: Ray, from capture in December through what must be April, you've gone through marching, camp, and a work detail. How hard was it to stay optimistic?

R: I suppose it was. But I'm not an optimist by nature (*laughs*). But you just keep things going, day after day. It was hard, I'll tell you.

T: What can you remember about the arrival of the Americans?

R: The first thing I told them was that I was a prisoner of war, and they took me right in then. And I was the only POW in that hospital there. Best thing is, that hospital was right across the road from where the depot was for storing all their potatoes and that stuff. So the first thing I did that day, the German intern told me, The Americans are right here, outside of the town. So I snuck over into that depot, and boy did I help myself to some wine and potatoes and I don't what all else I ate there.

T: As the only POW in a German hospital, I wonder how the Americans found you there.

R: Well, they just took over the town. I think they just found me, because they went through everything, the Americans did.

T: What happened to the German intern, do you know?

R: I don't know. When the Americans came, I was out of there. Never saw him again. I gave him his watch back. He was so good to me.

T: When the Americans found you, did they ask you any questions?

R: Oh yes. When I was still in Leipzig. About what I had been through, but not too much about the march, or the work detail. I was given a shower and some new clothes, because I wore them same clothes for five months. Deloused too. Bugs hadn't really been that much of a problem, though.

From Leipzig the Americans flew me to London, England. I stayed there I'd say maybe two weeks, in a military hospital, with other POWs. They fed us a lot of eggnog there. But I never found the company I was with. Back to the States I went on an LST back [to the US]. I gained about three pounds a day coming back.

(B, 300)

T: Ray, when you got back to the States and saw your mother and brothers and sisters, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

R: Not a whole lot. Nobody did at that time.

T: They didn't ask, or you didn't talk about it when they did ask?

R: I suppose that's most of it, that I didn't tell.

T: So you made it clear that you didn't want to talk about it.

R: Right.

T: Was anybody easier to talk to than the rest?

R: No, not really.

T: Is it correct to say that you kept the experience inside you, then?

R: I don't know. I suppose maybe I did, yes.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: Was it different when you got married in 1946 to your wife Catherine? How much did she know?

R: Maybe not a whole lot either.

T: Did that change over the years? Did you become more comfortable talking about it?

R: I think so, yes.

T: What made it easier for you to talk about it?

R: Oh, these [VA] chapters that started to bring it up. And the American ex-POWs. I've been a member for about ten years or so.

T: Did you have dreams after your return from being a POW?

R: At night at first there would be a lot of, I don't know how you'd say it, *(pauses ten seconds)* dreaming, but I would holler at night, you know. I was thinking they were still coming after me. People.

T: That's the last question I have, Mr. Winter, so I'll thank you for the interview today.

END OF INTERVIEW